

## Gold Standards—and Bare Minimums

Shelter veterinarians promote a road map to ensuring the “five freedoms” in animal shelters



BOTH IMAGES: MICHELLE RILEY/THE HSUS

### The idea of developing uniform standards

of care for animal shelters has been discussed in many circles for years. In 2008, the Association of Shelter Veterinarians (ASV) undertook this as a serious project, with the goal of creating a document that would help all shelters work at an improved level for the health and welfare of all the creatures in their care.

Three years and thousands of work-hours later, the group has released its guidelines.

In this e-mail interview, members of the task force that developed the guidelines—including doctors Kate Hurley, Brenda Griffin, Miranda Spindel, Mary Blinn, Sandra Newbury, and Jeanette O’Quin—address *Animal Sheltering’s* questions about the process, the standards, and their reasons for taking on the project.

### ASM: Why did the ASV think that developing these standards was necessary? Were you trying to fill a particular gap?

**ASV:** We recognize that animal sheltering has evolved dramatically over the past three or four decades, and knowledge of animal care in the shelter setting has also grown by leaps and bounds. Today’s sheltering organizations are diverse, ranging from large, well-funded “brick and mortar” facilities to small, loosely organized grassroots groups or individuals. For some animals, shelter stays are brief, whereas others receive extended, even lifetime, care. For years, we’ve been aware of the profound stress that cats and dogs entering shelters face, as well as the significant risk of infectious disease. But now we have a growing body of scientific evidence that supports these observations and provides us with better tools than ever to protect the physical and behavioral health of sheltered animals. Despite these things, the care of animals in shelters has remained

largely unstandardized and unregulated. In addition, many sheltering facilities were not designed to provide the conditions that we now know are necessary for animal health and well-being. So, yes—we believe a need for animal care guidelines, specifically for shelters, does exist in order to identify best and unacceptable practices as well as minimum standards of care—whether in a large organization, a small home-based effort, or something in between.

### Had you observed particular conditions or issues at shelters that played into your work on this project?

Part of the impetus for this project was an increasing number of high-profile incidents where shelter conditions led to severe animal suffering and unnecessary death. This disturbing trend was highlighted by a recent report from Dr. Randall Lockwood (the ASPCA’s senior vice president of forensic sciences and anti-cruelty projects), that around 25 percent of the 6,000 or so hoarding cases reported annually in the U.S. involved animal shelters or rescue operations, up from only around 5 percent 20 years ago. We hope the shelter standards will be a strong statement that inhumane conditions have no place in sheltering. However, the need for the standards goes well beyond this. Not only should animals in shelters be protected from suffering and neglect, there are also many other important nuances critical for maintaining health and well-being. For instance, now that we know how important vaccination on intake is to maintain animal health, we saw a need to provide support for shelter managers who want to provide this level of care but face barriers—financial or logistical—to implementation. This is just one example of hundreds that are included in the standards.

### What areas of shelter operations will the standards address?

All areas of sheltering that affect animal health and well-being or public health,



including management and record keeping, facility design and environment, population management, sanitation, medical health and physical well-being, behavioral health and mental well-being, group housing, animal handling, euthanasia, spay/neuter, animal transport, and public health.

**Are the standards designed to be “the gold standard”—the ideal, best-possible operating procedures for all shelters? Or are they more of a “bare minimum” list, letting shelters know that you consider these to be the basic standards that anyone should be able to achieve?**

All of the above! We have identified those practices that are absolutely “bare minimums” as well as some that are “gold standard.” Task force members strongly believe that these guidelines represent practical recommendations that are attainable by the vast majority of shelters and that, when implemented, protect the health and welfare of sheltered animals.

**Can you tell us a bit about your process in developing these standards? Were they based on studies, on shelter visits and observations there, on discussions with shelter workers, or some combination of these?**

The Association of Shelter Veterinarians convened a task force to create, publish, and present an extensively referenced, user-friendly document that establishes animal care and management practices that ensure the “five freedoms” for shelter animals. The 14 veterinarians who are members of the task force hail from a wide variety of backgrounds in shelter medicine—from veterinary colleges, national humane organizations, and municipal sheltering as well as the private sector. Collectively, this group represents several hundred years of experience working in

and with animal shelters! The guidelines are based on current principles of animal welfare, population medicine, immunology, infectious disease control, behavioral science, and public health, as determined by detailed reviews of the scientific literature and expert opinion.

**How do you think these new standards will help shelters?**

We hope that they will be a source of information and support as well as an impetus for continual improvement. They bring to light the fact that the needs of animals are fundamentally the same in all settings, from a large municipal shelter to a foster home. Our goals are to:

- provide shelters and communities with a tool for self-assessment and improvement;
- increase the consistency of the care delivered to animals in shelters;
- promote the highest standards of welfare, for existing facilities as well as new construction;
- provide sound reference material for regulatory purposes when communities look for guidance;
- provide a benchmark for when corrective action is needed;
- create a living document that will be responsive to developments in shelter medicine and animal care;
- establish what is required for a decent quality of life for populations of companion animals;
- dispel notions that high morbidity and mortality from disease and injury is the norm in shelters;
- connect expectations of sanitation, medical care, and mental/behavioral well-being to acceptable sheltering, and dispel any notion that these essentials are frivolous “extras” or cosmetic.

**There are some rumors circulating that the standards are being developed to target limited-admission/no-kill shelters. Is there any truth to them? Is there any particular type of shelter you are hoping to reach?**

The ASV guidelines are meant for the benefit of *all* sheltering organizations regardless of philosophy. While missions and resources may differ among shelters, the basic needs of companion animals remain the same.

This document focuses on identifying those needs, while recognizing that there can be many ways to meet them. All shelters want to optimize health and welfare for the animals in their care; we are providing a tool to help them accomplish this goal.

**Do you have any concerns about these standards being used as means to attack shelters that don’t have the funding to meet them? For some government—and even some private—shelters, they could become an “unfunded mandate.”**

Animal shelters are already being attacked, and have been for years. We think the ASV guidelines will actually support shelters as they respond to their critics and help critics recognize what reforms might be constructive. Until now there has been nothing to refer to, no consistent way to evaluate the merit of those accusations beyond what is defined in local animal cruelty statutes. The ASV guidelines can be used as a benchmark for comparison. For the majority of shelters, this means that they can respond to unfounded attacks by demonstrating that they meet or exceed the standards of care.

Remember also that this document is not regulatory. Shelters are not compelled to change anything. The unacceptable practices are noted as such because they are inhumane, and omission of those practices that are considered essential would result in animal suffering. The animal sheltering community cannot afford to ignore shelters that fail to provide humane care. The cost to the animals is too high, the damage to the integrity of animal sheltering is too great; and the end result could be the enactment of actual government mandates that regulate shelter management.

**What do you hope to see as a result of this work?**

It is our greatest hope that this document will serve shelter animals and those responsible for them by providing evidence-based, humane guidelines for their care. 